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SEDUCING-MACHINES: BAUDRILLARD, DELEUZE, AND CRASH

NECROPOLITICS BALLARD, BAUDRILLARD, CRASH, DELEUEZE/GUATTARI

Introduction

Amongst various psychoanalytic interpretations of J.G. Ballard's novel, *Crash* (1973), and David Cronenberg's adaptation of the same name (1996), the Ballard/Cronenberg *Crash* hermeneutical dyad has often been framed by or understood through and supplemented by the introduction of a third model of thought: Baudrillard's reading of Ballard's novel, which has been subsequently overlayed onto Cronenberg's filmic adaptation, and Deleuze's philosophical project inclusive of his work with Guattari. The introduction of Deleuze is a more recent phenomenon, and hardly a surprising one: one does not need to fully apprehend what "desiring-machines" are to find the phrase evocative of either the novel or the film. This essay

examines the shortcomings of Baudrillard's reading of Crash with regard to his broader philosophy, and sections off aspects of the increasing interest in the application of Deleuzian thought that might appear attractive to interpretations of Ballard's and Cronenberg's Crashes.

No one has ever died of contradictions (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009: 151).

Since the world is on a delusional course, we must adopt a delusional standpoint towards the world (Baudrillard, 2009: 1).

Simulator sickness is related to motion sickness. The most common symptoms of simulator sickness resemble motion sickness. (Granda, Davis, Inman and Molino, 2011: 34.11).

In August 2011, 2DayFM, a Sydney radio station in Australia, ran a competition called Cruze Car Chase. 30,000 contestants downloaded an app onto their smartphones, which located both them and a virtual car on a map of the city. Contestants set about the city and drew themselves into proximity with the virtual car and, once they were close enough, took possession of it. The car could also be stolen by subsequent contestants by the same means. Whoever had possession of the car when the radio presenters called the game to an end would be rewarded with a real car. The station might have intended that contestants play the game on foot, but most elected to drive. For a number of weeks, both to capture the car and elude others, contestants sped and ran each other off the road, all the while attending to the virtual car¹ With this collusion between the map and the territory, whereby the former eventually comes to precede latter resulting in totalisation of simulation, it is entirely appropriate, rather than surprising, that there were no real car crashes, only virtual collisions. With reference to this phenomenon, it is only appropriate that we defer to this anticipation of Baudrillard's:

If one thinks about it, people no longer project themselves into their objects [...] No more fantasies of power, speed and appropriation linked to the object itself, but instead a tacit of potentialities linked to usage: master, control and command, an optimisation of the play of possibilities offered by the car as vector and vehicle, and no longer an object of psychological sanctuary. This subject himself, suddenly transformed, becomes a computer at the wheel, not a drunken demiurge of power. The vehicle now becomes a kind of capsule, its dashboard the brain, the surrounding land-scape unfolding like a televised screen (instead of a live-in projectile as it was before). But we can conceive of a stage beyond this one, where the car is still a vehicle of performance, a stage where it becomes an information network [...] [S]omething – or someone: at this point there is no longer any difference – with which you are connected. The fundamental issue becomes the communication with the car itself, a perpetual test of the subject's presence with his own objects, an uninterrupted interface. (1998b: 146-147).

Would that the reward had been anything but a real car, for here the virtual, simulated intentional object relates directly to the real. This is not a rigid distinction between real and simulation, but Deleuze's always-already simulacral world in which the virtual is not entirely given over to simulation, which sits 'flush with the real' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009: 87) – the reality of the virtual as distinct from Baudrillard's virtual reality.

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Cronenberg's adaptation of the same name (1996), the Ballard/Cronenberg *Crash* hermeneutical dyad has often been framed by or understood through and supplemented by the introduction of a third model of thought: Baudrillard's reading of Ballard's novel, which has been subsequently overlayed onto Cronenberg's filmic adaptation, and Deleuze's philosophical project inclusive of his work with Guattari. The introduction of Deleuze is a more recent phenomenon, and hardly a surprising one: one does not need to fully apprehend what "desiring-machines" are to find the phrase evocative of either the novel or the film. Baudrillard often engaged with Deleuze's thought, while there is no indication of the latter either responding to or ever directly engaging with Baudrillard. Baudrillard's engagement with Deleuze (and Guattari) is at times critical, but more often takes the form of strategic self-defence mechanisms that disqualify a comparison or conflation between their modes of thought. This essay examines the shortcomings of Baudrillard's reading of *Crash* with regard to his broader philosophy, and sections off aspects of the increasing interest in the application of Deleuzian thought that might appear attractive to interpretations of Ballard's and Cronenberg's *Crashes*.

Baudrillard's essay, "Ballard's *Crash*", first published in 1976, seems to have had little effect on Anglophone critics until its publication in a special issue on postmodernism in the journal *Science Fiction Studies* in 1991. Critics were immediately divided. Both Sobchack and Hayles accused Baudrillard of intentionally misreading Ballard², the former emphatic and scathing in her response, the latter a little more measured in her criticism, and offering cautious praise for his imaginative, but nevertheless fictional style (see also Day, 2000: 277; and McQueen, 2011: 16). In the same issue Ballard dismissed the attention the science fiction genre was receiving courtesy of postmodern theory and criticism, though remained reticent about Baudrillard's reading (Sobchack, Hayles, Ballard, 1991: 327-323). Indeed, much of the critical material on *Crash* has been psychoanalytical in its approach, such as Ruddick (1992), Foster (1993), Adams (1999), with Creed (1998) providing a psychoanalytic reading of Cronenberg's adaptation. Despite these disagreements and differing interpretations, the Ballard/Baudrillard dyad persists: 'Despite the fact that, unlike the most famous theoretical "pseudo-couple" of Deleuze and Guattari, they have not collaborated together numerous points of exchange exist between them' (Noys, 2008). Luckhurst is correct that Ballard's novel is amenable to just about any theory one might wish to apply to it, while analyses inevitably result in 'involuntary repetition or discursive mimicry' (2005) of Ballard's prose. But this also extends to Baudrillard's analysis, as Youngquist (2000) manages to (re)produce Baudrillard's reading of the novel without mentioning him once. With Cronenberg's adaptation there emerged a triptych: Ballard/Baudrillard/Cronenberg, and a hermeneutic: 'through an effect of ironic precession, the critical analysis of a film pre-existed the film itself' – 'the perfect but de-mined adaptation, not so much of Ballard's novel as of his critical model, with which in the film, *in fine*, only coincides' (Thoret 2011). Constable conducts a comparative analysis of Ballard, Baudrillard, and Cronenberg, saying that it 'is unfortunate that the philosophical content of [the film] has been eradicated by the context in which it is usually discussed' (2011: 146).

But with respect to *Crash*, none have, to my knowledge, attempted to read Baudrillard against himself in the context of his other writing, or to re-evaluate Ballard's *Crash* on Baudrillard's terms not found in *Simulacra*, which will be the objective of the following. Arguably this is because *Simulacra* remains Baudrillard's most popular (but also overused and overestimated)

book, in no small part because of the attention it received by virtue of its inclusion in *The Matrix* (see Constable, 2009), but also because it was quickly translated from French into English, unlike the relatively benign sociology of *The System of Objects* ([1968] 2005), Baudrillard's first book, and the erratic translations of his work in general. His travelogue, *America* ([1986] 2010), and *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991), a commentary on the mass mediatisation of war, are fine exceptions that, much like *Simulacra*, appeal to a wider audience outside of academia. Baudrillard's next two books, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* and *Fatal Strategies*, both published in 1983, foregrounded an acerbic line of thought inaccessible in ways his previous work was not, that continued to escalate and forms the majority of his thought.

Baudrillard's *Crash* is in many ways anomalous, not for its analysis *per se*, but for its disharmony with the progression of his thought. First published in 1976, the essay was reprinted in 1981 in *Simulacra*. It thus precedes some of his most important writings, yet is imprecisely located amongst them. Read in context, there is a noticeable absence, or at least only vague intimations, of his most important concepts, namely symbolic exchange from *Symbolic Exchange and Death* ([1976] 2011a), seduction, which appears in *Forget Foucault* ([1977] 1987) and was crystallised in *Seduction* ([1979] 1990), and the fatal theory advanced in *Fatal Strategies* (1983/2008). *Symbolic Exchange* would be Baudrillard's final work that in some way resembled sociology, although the Marcel Mauss-inspired concept ([1923] 2010) of symbolic gift exchange would persist in his writings. The two latter terms, each evoking a cluster of related, idiomatic concepts, as well as being far more important than *Simulacra* in understanding Baudrillard's overall philosophy, will be crucial to understand Baudrillard's *Crash* in context. A possible explanation for *Crash*'s contextual dysfunction is that it is essential to Baudrillard's understanding of simulation, and the formation of this concept comes at the expense of references to the aforementioned.

In *Crash*, no more fiction or reality, it is hyperreality that abolishes both. Not even a critical regression is possible [...] [It] is the first great novel of the universe of simulation, the one with which we will all now be concerned – but one which, through a sort of reversal of the mass mediated substance (neon, concrete, car, erotic machinery), appears as if traversed by an intense force of initiation (1994: 118-119). In *Simulacra*, this is followed by the essay, "Simulacra and Science Fiction":

Crash is our world, nothing in it is "invented": everything in it is hyperfunctional, both the circulation and the accident, technique and death, sex and photographic lens, everything in it is like a giant, synchronous, simulated machine: that is to say the acceleration of our known models, of all models that surround us, blended and hyperoperational in the void. (Ibid.:125).

One wonders if Baudrillard's simulation, in its formulation in *Simulacra*, could have developed without this reading of *Crash*. The disappearance of forms of representation into simulation described in "The Precession of Simulacra" follow:

it [the image] is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the *absence* of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (1994: 6)

This processional logic has proved crucial in many understandings of postmodernism, and the progression conforms to Baudrillard's understanding of the unfolding of science fiction as imbricated with the three orders of simulacra: 1) 'Natural', imitative simulacra 'founded on the image' belonging to desire and the utopian imaginary; 2) Promethean simulacra of capitalist production, globalisation, expansion and liberation, corresponding SF, 'strictly speaking', and particularly to the science fiction of Philip K. Dick; and 3) Informational simulation, the hyperreal (more real than real), in which the imaginary is liquidated. (Ibid.:121-122). It is in this third order, which conflates the third and fourth stages in "The Precession" that 'the good old imaginary of science fiction is dead', and 'something else is in the process of emerging (not only in fiction but in theory as well)': the current model of science fiction 'that is no longer one' of science fiction (Ibid.:121, 125).

The following seeks to address the limitations of Baudrillard's reading of *Crash* by placing the novel in the context of his broader philosophical project, and sections off aspects of the increasing interest in the application of Deleuzian thought that might appear attractive to interpretations of Ballard's *Crash*.

II. Rereading Baudrillard's *Crash*: mirror of desire/ mirror of production

Sylvere Lotringer: You keep criss-crossing Gilles Deleuze and Felix [sic] Guattari's path, breaking away from representation, rejecting dialectics, dismissing meaning and metaphor. You part company with them on the terrain of subjectivity: they put the subject in flux, you abolish it. They make desire the basis on becoming; you seem becoming as annihilating desire. Jean Baudrillard: I couldn't care less about desire. I neither want to abolish it nor to take it into consideration. I wouldn't know where to put it anymore (Baudrillard, 1987a: 74).

Ballard's *Crash* is a highly ambivalent work, at times dispassionate and detached, at others eroticised and zealous. There is no single authoritative interpretation, and this is resultant of the novel's ability to contradict itself multiple times. Interpretations are thus selective by necessity. Baudrillard's understanding of Ballard has been influential, though rigorously scrutinised since it appeared in *Science Fiction Studies* in 1991, and gained new purchase and new detractors with the release of Cronenberg's adaptation.

III. Political Economy

In considering both Deleuze and Baudrillard, we are presented with two strikingly different post-Marxist political economies differentiated by considerations of both production and desire as either positive or negative forces informed by the logic of capitalism: in the case of the former, we are presented with intensive, real and reality-producing desiring-machines; in the case of the latter, a critique of the simulated conflation of desire and power (a "molecular" Law). But both strains of thought seek to think outside of Marx's universal equivalency that guarantees exchangeability. Capitalism sees in the social a commodity. Deleuze and Guattari challenge this by seeking to overcome capitalism's self-regulating control over the positive forces it creates (desire *and* production) by conflating desire *with* production, and seek its proliferation. Marx understood consumption as false needs generated by capitalism, although for Baudrillard this was a gross metaphysic (1981) because it implied a functional, logical and binary process. Thus, for Baudrillard, Marxism is unable to see beyond production (1975), and as much can be said for his thoughts on Deleuze. But for Deleuze and Guattari, the distinction

between production and consumption is negligible, as the latter, far from being inversive, folds itself into the former: 'everything is production: *production of productions* [...] *productions of consumptions*, of sensual pleasures [...] incorporating recording and consumption within production itself, thus making them the productions of one and the same process' (2009: 4).

In its own way, desiring-production seeks to disrupt Marx's conceptions of use-value and exchange value: 'The definition of surplus value must be modified in terms of the machinic surplus value of constant capital, which distinguishes itself from the human surplus value of variable capital and from the nonmeasurable nature of this aggregate of surplus value of flux' (Ibid.:237). But when Baudrillard says that desiring-production is a simulation, he intentionally annuls its pretences to the discourse of liberation. Maximum participation is demanded of the social by capitalism, and the proliferation of sign-values (forms that have no relation to either use value of exchange value) cancels the symbolic space of alienation the subject once occupied, meaning that transgression and revolution are inconceivable. For Baudrillard, what can be exchanged can be assigned value, and what is real is that which can be simulated. Thus unregulated, nomadic desire is a capital-sanctioned transgression (a taboo that *must* be broken) that will always return to production within the limits of capital. Every term in a Deleuzian multiplicity, no matter how heterogeneous, is exchangeable for another of equal value. For Deleuze, every machine connects with another machine and another and so on; for Baudrillard, each machinic component is as interchangeable as the next: an endless simulation of desire and production.

IV. Seduction

The satisfaction the handyman experiences when he plugs something into an electric socket [...] or by the pleasures of violating a taboo. The rule of continually producing production, or grafting producing onto the product, is characteristic of desiring-machines or of primary production: the production of production (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009: 7).

Ballard's *Crash* is, as Baudrillard understood it, a novel of simulation. But it is *also* a novel of *seduction*, in Baudrillard's use of the word. While we cannot think of a real world outside of simulation, we are unable to think of simulation as being immune to nor unable to accommodate the reversible logic of seduction, which is its demise. Neither simulation nor seduction cannot be thought of without one another. Simulation is the systemic state in which experience of the world has come to take place; seduction is the latent, fatal logic of reversibility endemic to the simulated world. Like simulation, seduction is neither located nor possible in the order of the real: it is the mastery of artifice and appearances and the hyperreal (all things proper to simulation). If simulation is hyperreal (truer than true), then seduction, to seduce (as the object does) and to be seduced (as the subject is), responds in turn with the falseness of the false, 'use[ing] signs which are already simulators [...] It displaces them, turns them into traps and produces a splendid effect snatched from the imperative of veracity of signs, and even of desire, which is no longer at stake' (1987a: 100).

The first condition of seduction is to gain an equal footing with simulation. Baudrillard's reading of *Crash* accomplishes this, but fails to move beyond description: it establishes the body as a technological medium rendered hyperfunctional, lacking in desire and morality; a

technological landscape neither fictional nor real, where the photographic and cinematic image participates in, anticipates and cancels out the real; and, at this point, irreversible (1994: 111-119). This is the first principle of simulation, and the one in which Ballard's characters find themselves.

I was already becoming a kind of emotional cassette, taking my place with all those scenes of pain and violence that illuminated the margins of our lives – television newsreels of ward and student riots, natural disasters and police brutality which we vaguely watched on the colour TV set in our bedroom as we masturbated each other. This violence experienced at so many removes had become intimately associated with our sex acts [...] extensions of that real world of violence calmed and tamed within our television programmes and the pages of news magazines (Ballard [1973] 1995: 37). Surrounded by car crashes in an impersonal yet coldly intense 'overactive technarchy' (Ballard [1973] 1995: 175), initially under Vaughan's leadership, Ballard's characters adopt the fatal strategy of seduction: an ironic, aggressive hyper-conformity.

V. Becoming-object

In the consumer package, there is one object finer, more precious and more dazzling than any other – and even more laden with connotations than the automobile, in spite of the fact that that encapsulates them all. That object is the BODY. (Baudrillard, 1998a: 129).

Surprisingly, "becoming-object" is nomenclature specific to Baudrillard rather than to Deleuze. If Deleuze can be considered a philosopher of difference, then Baudrillard is a philosopher of the object, in either its sociological orientation in consumption, or in its seductive, fatal form. For Deleuze and Guattari, the process of becoming is to occupy "molecular" states forms marginalised by psychoanalysis (animal, woman, etc.) and Western philosophy, in order to think of oneself not as a ready-made self, but as a type of proto-subject that allows for and insists upon constant metamorphosis and flux: an assemblage, a multiplicity, a body without organs, or what have you: a desiring-machine in general. There is no doubt that for Baudrillard, Deleuze's libidinal, desiring-machines exist, but these too have passed into simulation (1987a: 15, 35): there is no desire to apprehend or locate within or as the real; both power and desire fall under the sign of production, and become the mirror image of one another, and anticipate one another. Thus when 'power blends into desire and desire blends into power, let's forget them both' (Ballard [1973] 1995: 19). While production, desiring-machines and becomings are both products of and producers of the real for Deleuze and Guattari (2009: 26) Baudrillard insists that these concepts are strictly metaphorical, unsubstantial and, indeed, injurious perpetuations of the logic of simulated capital. The symbolic alienation of deterritorialisation (Baudrillard, 1988a: 50) is no more real than desire, the 'psychic metaphor of capital' (1987a: 26). To become-object, to be seduced, is also to undergo a metamorphosis that accepts the body as capable of being ensnared in the game of appearances. And one must not desire. 'Only the subject desires; only the object seduces' (Baudrillard, 2008: 141). These descriptions seemed to be a language in search of objects, or even, perhaps, the beginnings of a new sexuality divorced from any possible physical expression (Ballard [1973] 1995: 35). However carnal an act of sodomy with Vaughan would have been, the erotic dimension was absent. Yet his absence made a sexual act with Vaughan entirely possible [...]; an event as stylised and abstracted as those recorded in Vaughan's

photographs (Ballard [1973] 1995: 103).

That the body is abstracted and detached from the real and as interchangeable as a photograph is evident: images from medical textbooks are subsectioned and substituted for the body so that it becomes a 'broken mosaic' (Ballard [1973] 1995: 10); in the car, the body is luminous, dispersed and kaleidoscoped over reflective interiors (ibid.:171); car crash scenes take the form of interactive art installations. Baudrillard's main objection is that a Deleuzian machine is one that still has the capacity to signify by means of anatomy, functionality and desire. To be removed from the law of appearances is to preclude seduction, and to fall back into waste desire: 'Without Vaughan watching us, recording our postures and skin areas with his camera, my orgasm had seemed empty and sterile, a jerking away of waste tissue' (ibid.: 120). No matter how decentred or molecular, desire and production are proper to the privileging of the subject and the real; simulation and reversibility are proper to the object and to seduction.

In *Crash*, the body is the consummate object of consumption, but never one that is desired or desires: consider Catherin's sterile, functional 'demonstration model' body, whose passive orifices are void of secretions, waste and mucous (ibid.:112), and more intelligible through the rhetoric proper to the object of Euclidean geometry and biomechanics than to the subject. By contrast, the car, the epitome of the object (Baudrillard 2005: 69), becomes pubically hirsute, a spermatorrheic effusor engine coolant. In this sense, the car-as-object becomes the sensory horizon of the characters invalid-subjectivity: 'I realised that the crushed cabin of my car [...] was the perfect module for all the quickening futures of my own life' (ibid.:69). Deleuze's interpenetrative and interconnective desiring-machines are continuously producing, but in seduction the subject remains inertial: all energy is acquired by the object (Baudrillard, 1987a: 83). This is not to apprehend the object as a "supersubject" (Pawlett, 2011: 143), rather to occupy the strategic position of reversibility.

VI. Reversibility

In Ballard's *Crash*, the film industry generates its simulacral car-crash victims with make-up applied to screen actresses, who conform to ready-made simulations:

The make-up woman [...] had worked for more than [an] hour on the simulated wounds. The actress sat motionlessly in the driving seat as the last brushstrokes completed the elaborate lacework of blood [...] and simulated bruises. Already she was assuming the postures of a crash victim [...] Did she instinctively mimic the postures of this injured woman, transforming in her own magnificent person the injuries of a commonplace accident, the soon-forgotten bloodstains and sutures? (Ballard [1973] 1995: 109). Here we see the circular logic of simulacra that detach themselves from representation and the real: the film, itself a series based upon a model, will provide a new model for subsequent series of simulacra.

But there is no finer model of seduction than the character of Seagrave. The actresses's wounds are simulacra of Seagrave's and, following this, it is Seagrave, accompanied by a mannequin, that stages the crash that precedes the "collision". This is the reverse logic of cause and effect through the capturing of speed through the camera: 'Speed is the triumph of effect over cause, the triumph of instantaneity over time as depth, the triumph of the surface and pure objectality over the profundity of desire' (Baudrillard, 2010: 7). Upon close inspection, Ballard sees only a 'nightmar[ish] parody'(Ballard [1973] 1995: 110) of events, 'potent

confusions of fiction and reality, summed up in the pathetic but sinister figure of Seagrave disguised as the screen actress' (ibid.:111).

It is this game of seduction, to challenge the logic of simulation, that Seagrave enters. Games are not to be confused with "becoming," they are not nomadic, and do not belong to the realm of desire. They are characterised [...] by their capacity to reproduce a given arbitrary constellation in the same terms an indefinite number of times. Their true form is cyclical or recurrent. (Baudrillard, 1990: 146) For Vaughan, 'one car-crash looks like another' (Ballard [1973] 1995: 129), and it is the desire to create a singular, originary and unrepeatable and "true" event that obsesses him, and he fantasises about Elizabeth Taylor's car-crash death by envisioning endless ways in which this event could occur, rehearsing it by means of substituting photographs of wounds for parts of her body. Seagrave enters the game of seduction to render reversible Vaughan's desire, to make the false (seduction) more intelligible than the true (simulation), thus enacting seduction's reversible effect upon simulation. This takes the form of anticipating and exceeding Vaughan's simulated desire for Taylor's car-crash death. Seagrave's cancellation of simulation becomes the 'only true accident' (ibid.:7). As Catherine, Ballard, and Vaughan encounter the crash site, they see Seagrave's crystalline form, his leopard skin coat, depressed chest and discharged wig:

I realised what had most upset Vaughan. This was not Seagrave's death, but that in his collision, still wearing Elizabeth Taylor's wig and costume, Seagrave had pre-empted that real death which Vaughan had reserved for himself. In his mind, from that accident onwards, the film actress had already died (ibid.:187).

Here we can see that Baudrillard never gets passed a description of *Crash*, to recognise that seduction and reversibility inform its ironic, ineluctably fatal logic: from this point on, the already disjointed narrative implodes according to the logic of Baudrillard's early emphasis on symbolic exchange, later absorbed into seduction:

To defy the system with a gift to which it cannot respond save by its own collapse and death. Nothing, not even the system, can avoid the symbolic obligation, and it is in this trap that the only chance of a catastrophe for capital remains. The system turns on itself [...] For it is summoned to answer [...] The system must itself commit suicide in response to the multiplied challenge of death and suicide (2011a: 37).

Vaughan is unable to respond to Seagrave's act, and can only respond by suiciding, as symbolic exchange/seduction do not operate in the order of the real or the semiotic, rather they call them into question by challenging the symbolic laws of use value, exchange value, and the circulation of capital and signs by means of escalating reciprocity.

VII. Deleuze and *Crash*

When Baudrillard was not contrasting his ideas with those of Deleuze and Guattari (1987a: 21) (1994: 113) he was opening critiquing them (1975: 147) (1987a: 17-19; 34-36; 74-75) (1994: 134; 137; 140 fn. 3) (1990: 9) (2011a: 137). All three were inventive thinkers, but Baudrillard was committed to new forms of critique that effectively "pulverized" the subject, to use the most common and appropriate term. Deleuze and Guattari, however, countered critique with creativity, and formulated some of the most interesting theories of subjectivity and identity politics within capitalism. It will be one of goals of the following to show that there are far more

complementarities between these thinkers than Baudrillard was prepared to admit (to my knowledge neither Deleuze nor Guattari responded to these provocations, nor did they engage with Baudrillard's thought in any way).

Importantly, there have been three instances in which Deleuze and Guattari have been linked to *Crash*. Firstly, in a passing remark, Bök links the eroticisation of the automobile in both Futurism and Ballard's *Crash* to Deleuze-Guattarian desiring-machines (2002: 54). In a book that explores the pseudoscience of 'pataphysics, to which Baudrillard constantly made reference, if not subscribed to in full, this is far too problematic (for reasons addressed above). Secondly, Varga's "The Deleuzian Experience of Cronenberg's *Crash* and Wenders' *The End of Violence*" contends that [Cronenberg's film] is by no means a Baudrillardian neo-conservative celebration of the disavowal of the body but instead explores the limits of losses accompanying transformation [...] This critical perspective helps to distinguish between the usefulness of Deleuze and Guattari's thinking and the nihilism of Baudrillard's later writings in which there is no possibility of liberation or transgression. Deleuze and Guattari's thinking is not the same as Baudrillard's techno-fetishism (2003: 263).

The application of Deleuze and Guattari to Cronenberg's adaptation is more in spirit than in evidence as the analyses owes itself more to theories other than Deleuze and Guattari. It does, however open a space for a Deleuzian interpretation, although one premised solely on rejecting Baudrillard's reading of Ballard's novel in relation to the filmic adaptation. Finally, Depper reads *Crash* through Deleuze's study of Francis Bacon and narrative strategies. But Depper's crucial insight is that while 'not "officially sanctioned" by Ballard in the manner of Baudrillard, Deleuze's work has the potential to initiate a more complex exploration of the intellectual underpinnings of his writing' (2008: 51). The following essay explores this relationship further, with a comparative analysis of Baudrillard and Deleuze, and Ballard and Cronenberg's *Crash*.

VIII. Organs Drive Orifices

'In *Crash* I'm saying that if some harsh reality envelopes you, rather than be crushed, destroyed or diminished by it, embrace it fully. Develop it and take it even further than it wanted to go itself.' – David Cronenberg. (Rodley, 1997: 202). Baudrillard had apparently intended to write a critique of Deleuze and Guattari, in a similar vein to *Forget Foucault*, with specific attention to their political economy of desiring-production (Butler, 2011: 78). But both Baudrillard and Deleuze's philosophical projects are highly syncretic modes of thought that are, in many ways, amenable to one another. Cronenberg's adaptation is a very different text to Ballard's and requires a different approach with regard to both Baudrillard and Deleuze. In contrast to Ballard's novel, a crucial exchange in Cronenberg's film tells us that we might be operating in a Deleuzian political economy of desire:

BALLARD (James Spader): *It's all very satisfying. I'm not sure I understand why.*

VAUGHAN (Elias Koteas): *That's the future, Ballard. And you're a part of it. You're beginning to see that for the first time there's a benevolent psychopathology that beckons towards us. For example, the car crash is a fertilising rather than a destructive event, a liberation of sexual energy [...] To experience that, to live that, that's my project.*

BALLARD: *What about the reshaping of the human body by modern technology? I thought*

that was your project?

VAUGHAN: *That's just a crude sci-fi concept. It kind of floats on the surface and doesn't threaten anybody. I use it to test the resilience of my potential partners in psychopathology.*

Given Cronenberg's own thoughts on the film (above), there is here a resemblance between the reversibility of Baudrillard's fatal theory, and Deleuze and Guattari's reactionary unconscious, an albeit rare occurrence where desiring-production is not antithetical to dominant forms, but rather conforms to them in order to disrupt them (2009: 105). They ask:

Which is the revolutionary path? [...] To withdraw from the world market [...] Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of that market, of decoding and deterritorialisation? [...] Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to "accelerate the process," as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet. (Ibid.:239-240).

In this sense, Baudrillard's and Deleuze's notions of the schizophrenic are not as dissimilar as the former supposes (1988a: 27): rather than characterised by disconnection with the real, the schizophrenic experience is one of intense proximity to simulacra and immersion in the hyperreal. For the latter, while desire produces the real, the schizophrenic also intentionally seeks 'the exterminating angle' (Deleuze and Gauttari, 2009: 35) of production and capital. This is the exception rather than the rule in Deleuze, thus applying it to Ballard's *Crash* would be less convincing than locating it within Baudrillard's broader philosophy, that the 'hysteric combines the passion for seduction with that of simulation' (1990: 119).

Rather, it is their philosophies of representation and the cinematographic image that are strikingly similar, as both emphasise the autonomy of the image and inhuman perception, and are object-centred. It was shown above that Baudrillard's understanding of photography and cinema in Ballard's *Crash* is uninformed by the game of appearances and reversibility inherent to seduction and simulation. Both philosophies seek to disrupt the Platonic idea of the falsity of representation. For Baudrillard, via a processional logic of technical perfection and cultural production and consumption, images subsume real, detaching themselves from reality to take its place. Seduction becomes the countermove to this, not to restore the real, but to bring simulation into crisis. In a similar approach, particularly that taken in *Cinema 2* and *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze focuses on the "power of the false", the much-neglected concession in Platonism that simulacra³, far from just posing the question of the real, are ineluctably self-reflexive, and question their own status as representation: 'The model [the real] collapses into difference, while the copies disperse into the dissimilitude of the series which they interiorise' (Deleuze, 2004: 156). While the desiring-machines of *Anti-Oedipus* never elude the subject or production, Deleuze's cinema project certainly does, and offers a model of Baudrillard's becoming-object. Vaughan identifies the commonalty between Deleuze's cinema project and Baudrillard's *Seduction*, going so far as to imply that the latter anticipates the former (2010: 51). For Deleuze, post-World War II cinema provides no occasion for the metamorphosis of the subject *per se*, but rather, instantiates the "reformulation" of the object, to the extent that that 'the object becomes a point of view in its own right' (Trifonova, 2004: 135 and 2003), and this is remarkably similar to Baudrillard's reversible object that outwits, seduces and 'thinks us' (2011b: 31). Deleuze's conception of

cinema is reversible, in Baudrillard's sense of seduction, since it 'substitutes the power of the false for the form of the true' (Deleuze, 1989: 131).

There are instances in Ballard's *Crash* that are suggestive of Deleuze's notion of the virtual. Ballard (the character) says the 'crash was the only real experience I had been through for years. For the first time I was in physical confrontation with my own body'. But this is followed by a meditation on the irreality of this experience.

After being bombarded endlessly by road-safety propaganda it was almost a relief to find myself in an actual accident. Like everyone else bludgeoned by these billboard harangues and television films of imaginary accidents, I had felt a vague sense of unease that the gruesome climax of my life was being rehearsed years in advance, and would take place on some highway or road junction known only to the makers of these films (39).

While Baudrillard's reality-anticipating simulation is in evidence – the inversion of cause-and-effect (1988b: 13) – the Deleuzian virtual might be more appropriate here, in that this is as much a preceding of the real as it is a rendering-indistinguishable of the cinematographic and the real: the image 'replaces its own object', 'erases or destroys its reality which passes into the imaginary', while 'bringing out all the reality which imaginary or the mental create' (Deleuze, 1989: 7).

For Sinclair, Cronenberg's adaptation does Ballard's novel a disservice with its 'cryogenic elegance' and sterile formalism, the actor's having the 'presence of a computer-generated simulacrum, making for a benign, semi-pornographic film (1999: 44, 59). The reception of the film was indeed, remarkable in the extreme reactions it evoked from the media. This is well documented in Barker et al.'s extensive exercise in audience-reception studies, *The Crash Controversy* (2001), which covers the various accusations of depravity, poor taste, perversion, pornography and the banning of the film in various places. But there was also the speculation that the film would go beyond arousing filmgoers, and inspire imitators. Two things are of interest here: (1) the question of imitation and (2) the accusations of pornography.

Firstly, there is, in Deleuze, the propensity for a simulation that outstrips itself, in ways comparable to seduction, where the image proceeds from its non-referential, non-indexical autonomy to a point at which 'copies themselves flip over into simulacra' (2004: 156). We can understand instances in Cronenberg's *Crash* as simulacra ordered by the syntheses of repetition outlined in Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, since the 'secret of repetition [...] lies in that which is repeated, in that which is twice signified' (2004: 117). This first passive synthesis is a habitual incarnation of the past brought into the present (photography and photographs assume this function in the film); second is the active synthesis of memory, whereby the past is fully brought into the present (the nostalgia for sex assumes this function); third is the synthesis of time, which the production of the new brought about by repetition, whereby the 'present is no more than an actor, an author, an agent destined to be effaced; while the past is not more than a condition operating by default' (Ibid.: 117). This final synthesis is useful to understand the recreation of the car crashes of screen icons James Dean and Jayne Mansfield. Again, Seagrave (Peter MacNeill) makes for a tragi-comedic falsification: an overweight and balding James Dean; oversized prosthetic breasts and a blonde wig to double as Mansfield. Both scenes are decidedly unspectacular, unlike the

hyperreal events that inspired them. As Deleuzian reality-appropriating simulacra, they question their own representational status; as does the making of fiction out of/as reality. At the conclusion of the former, there is this exchange:

BALLARD: 'Is this part of the act, or are they really hurt?'

HELEN (Holly Hunter): 'I don't know. You can never be sure with Vaughan. This is his show.'

Unlike the novel's Seagrave/Taylor crash, at the of the Seagrave/Mansfield crash site, Vaughan is both irritated by the lack of control he had in the former crash, and admires its pseudo-fidelity, which produces the ironic effect of the autonomy of the event from its cause. These simulacra 'function by themselves, passing and repassing the decentred centres of the eternal return' (Ibid.: 156). This type of cinema, for Deleuze, as Colebrook suggests, 'disrupts the pre-given categories through which we think; it is minor, not because it is enjoyed by an elite, but because it does not yet have a people or group whose world it represents' (2006: 88). Cronenberg's *Crash* is decidedly unrelenting in its "realism", yet like Ballard's novel, informed by the science-fictional nature of simulation, making it a type of '*hardcore fantasy reality*' (Rodley, 1997: 189). Here, the supposed vulnerability and suggestibility of spectators to *Crash*'s perversity, and the exploration of reality and fiction makes for a film that has the potential to create a new audience-image relation, an autosuggestion that would outstrip the film itself, rendering moot any formal distinction between the simulated image and simulated experience of the world.

Secondly, the accusations of pornography naturally arouses a discussion of desire. Constable suggests that the film can be understood as a critique of voyeurism and both the car-as-object of advertising and the human body as objects of consumption. Unlike Ballard's and Baudrillard's equivalency of the image and the body, Cronenberg's characters are locked into the repetition through the medium of film, concluding that their 'use of images is thus a symptom of their status as crash victims, and effect of trauma rather than a cause'. Thus they are propelled into disconnection with the real, and the car crash awakens desire (2011: 147-149). For Baudrillard, pornography is obscene, not in any moralising sense of word, but rather because it portrays the body, 'in its entirety, *realized*' (2003: 27). Contrary to contemporary debates about its highly-mediated irreality and sexual aggression, pornography is objectively true: in its availability, technical perfection of both the body and the medium, close-ups and anatomical detail and transparency, it is the obscene-as-desire:

Ours is a culture of premature ejaculation [...] Our centre of gravity has been displaces towards a libidinal economy concerned only with the naturalisation of desire, a desire dedicated to drives, or to a machine-like functioning, but above all, to the imaginary of repression and liberation (Baudrillard, 1990: 38).

This is not prudishness or conservatism, rather, for Baudrillard, pornography is an unfettered, Deleuzian desiring-machine that is unable to seduce: it is the 'height of the simulacrum' rather than the 'secret of appearances' (Ibid.: 60). Baudrillard outlines this further:

The law of seduction takes the form of an uninterrupted ritual exchange where seducer and seduced constantly raise the stakes in a game that never ends [...] Sex, on the other hand, has a quick, banal end: the orgasm, the immediate form of desire's realisation (Ibid.: 22).

In Ballard's *Crash*, fluids are rampant: engine coolant, saliva, snot, vomit, blood, semen, vaginal and anal secretions form 'magic pool[s]'; reflective surfaces which inspire in Ballard an 'erotic delirium' (16). Interiors, both automotive and organic, are, in the novel, as important as exteriors, and this speaks to Ballard's preface, in which he describes *Crash* as 'the first pornographic novel based on technology' (1995: 6). This is not so in Cronenberg's *Crash*. Ballard is frequently unable to ejaculate, as is the case with his encounters with the production assistant (Alice Poon) and Helen. Indeed, Catherine's (Deborah Kara Unger) glistening hand, flung over the car seat, is the only viscous image in the film. The cinematography is devoid of the luminescence Ballard gives fluids in the novel: the blood at car-crashes has a mat, already coagulated, finish, and saliva leaves no residue. Reflective surfaces rather than bodily interiors are prominent in either their aesthetic qualities, or as a mode of engagement: Catherine's breast reflected on the aeroplane fuselage; Ballard's watching through the car's rear-vision mirror as Vaughan has sex with a prostitute (Yolande Julian) and, later with Catherine. These reflections are articular surfaces rather than sites marked by viscosity, mirroring Ballard's interest in Gabrielle's (Rosanna Arquette) callipers and thigh wound rather than her genitals. This is a different type of technical perfection to that of pornography. Cronenberg's *Crash* is not a type of meta-critique of pornography or of voyeurism and desire; rather the anti-orgasmic, and thus seductive nature of the film, is expressed at its conclusion, as Catherine and Ballard copulate on a freeway embankment, the former injured from a crash:

CATHERINE: *I think I'm alright.*

BALLARD: *Maybe the next one, Darling.*

IX. Coda

Please be careful of your safety. Take care of your surroundings and pay attention to traffic. Do not look at the app while crossing the road (A warning for Cruze Car Chase contestants on 2DayFM's website: <http://www.2dayfm.com.au/win/cruze-car-chase>).

*Vaughan isn't interested in pedestrians (Ballard, *Crash*: 150).*

The pedestrian was surely the most disadvantaged and miserable of contestants. Presumably, unlike those playing by automobile, they were more in need of the prize. Two of them in the Cruze Car Chase played the game by foot. One chased the other through a National Park and found herself lost: 'It was getting dark really quickly but I was so focused and determined ... to get that virtual car ... but then a couple of times I fell down, and that's when I realised it was dangerous' (<http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s3326300.htm>). For them, it was a pseudo-event: they didn't have cars, and they didn't win one either. No seduction, only desire. Instead, one of them got lost in a park and had to be rescued by police. But she did not need a car to get simulation sickness. For Deleuze, events, representations, fictions and the real are not to be distinguished from one another, nor organised hierarchically into originary and simulacral. Baudrillard, by contrast, constantly addressed the real, or rather its inability to be apprehended without the intrusion or mediation by simulacra, and his fatal theory of seduction is, if not entirely a solution, certainly a coming-to terms with and disruption of simulation. With reference to the Cruze Car Chase, we have to wonder, to which stream of traffic, and what surroundings were contestants supposed to pay attention? My

rereading of Baudrillard's *Crash* aimed to establish a caveat to the growing Deleuze-inspired scholarship in relation to Ballard's novel and, by extension, Cronenberg's film. It also provides a more appropriate context found in Baudrillard's own philosophy. Examining the various shifts in interpretation brought about by Baudrillardian and Deleuzian adaptations of *Crash* highlights important commonalities, but also emphasises where the two should be kept apart.

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Endnotes

1 – One contestant wrote on a message board: "the people playing are psychos. 1 Guy ran me off the road. And at 1 point when it was at the end of the road I was on doing close to 100km in like a 50km dirt road (speeding is bad kids) and I had like 3 people behind me flashing their lights and beeping me to go faster." <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s3326300.htm>. (My discussion is also informed by my listening to the radio at the time).

2 – Sobchack accuses Baudrillard of substituting his own reverie for Ballard's irony (1991: 328), while Hayles understood *Crash* as teleologically transcendent (1991: 323). Ballard wrote in a 1995 preface: 'Needless to say, the ultimate role of *Crash* is cautionary, a warning against that brutal, erotic and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape' (1995: 6). He redacted this in an interview conducted in the same year: '*Crash* is not a cautionary tale. *Crash* is what it appears to be. It is a psychopathic hymn' (Self, 1995: 348).

3 – Deleuze and his commentators, such as Colebrook (2002 and 2006), use the terms simulacra and simulation interchangeably. When not quoting Deleuze, I use them in Baudrillard's sense of the words.

taken from here

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